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Ending in Honors

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(What follows is a slightly revised version of a presentation given by Sam Schuman at the 2008 NCHC conference in San Antonio, Texas.)

I'll be wise hereafter, and seek for grace.
—Caliban, *The Tempest*

Part One

Sometime in the year after the 1983 NCHC national conference in Philadelphia, I had a gripe. A younger and less circumspect professor in those halcyon days of a quarter-century ago, I was not hesitant to express it: Why, I wondered irritated and irritatingly, doesn't an organization like this one do a better job of welcoming and orienting newcomers to Honors? I thought at the time that the NCHC had a tendency to drift toward being an "old boy's club," where neophytes often felt baffled and uncomfortable, marginalized and patronized. (I had been attending the meeting for eleven years at that point and still felt "out of it" most of the time.) Grumble, grumble, grumble. At that point in our collective history, one of the presiding elders of our organization was Dr. John Portz. I have always admired John and seen in him the quintessence of much of what is best about the honors movement. He was bright, creative, funny, humane, unpredictable, endlessly inquisitive. We shall not look upon his like again. When John heard my complaint about our collective inability to bring new people into the honors movement and into NCHC and, in fact, into our annual conference, he responded, in fairly typical John Portz fashion, "why don't you do something about it?" I was, of course, somewhat startled by the unique notion, at least in academe, that instead of griping about something, I should try to fix it. And thus was born at the 1984 conference in Memphis "Beginning in Honors."

Next year will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of that launch, and I hope we'll mark that modest anniversary: "Beginning in Honors" has probably served—and served pretty well, I suspect—several thousand of us and our colleagues over these years. I organized the first several sessions and then was joined as co-director by Anne Ponder (with whom I still collaborate professionally); for the last many years, the workshop has benefitted enormously from the skilled leadership of my old friend in honors Ted Estess. "Beginning in Honors" has spawned children: the *Beginning in Honors Handbook*,

"Developing in Honors," and the like. Today I want to share with you—and then invite us all to share with each other—some thoughts about the other end of the honors career: the ending.

My comments are in four parts: where folks go when they leave honors; how to know when to leave honors; how to end the honors career; and whether there is an honors afterlife. Since I've also been a chief academic officer and, twice, a campus chancellor, my remarks are easily generalized. I could well be talking about ending a deanship or a college presidency or any other position of senior administrative responsibility at a college or university.

PART TWO

Where do we go when we leave our work as honors directors or deans? (Aside: I'm going to drift back and forth between honors director and honors dean; honors program and honors college; by and large, for our purposes today, assume I'm speaking of both.) A careful statistical analysis of this question might be an interesting bit of research for someone looking for a topic in higher education administration. Anecdotally and far less scientifically, I've seen people go in several directions.

- Some honors directors or deans go (you should pardon the expression) up. They ascend into the ether (or descend into the pit, depending upon your perspective) of more senior administrative positions. Although the more common career path is probably from department chair to dean (and thence to provost and president), lots of chief honors officers have stepped on to this path. And it is a good one to follow. I recall the then-director of the ACE administrative interns program suggesting that honors leadership is an excellent stepping stone to other managerial positions in academia. Honors directors generally do pretty much what other academic administrators do: make and keep track of budgets; hire, counsel, and review teachers; organize schedules; put out fires; oversee academic facilities (often too small and decrepit); provide oversight of the curriculum; and the like. But honors administrators tend to do those tasks on a smaller, and usually far less visible (hence less risky) scale. (I recall an aphorism of Grey Austin, another old-time NCHC leader I admire. Grey said that being an honors director is like being a small boy who wets his pants: it gives you a nice, warm feeling, and you hope nobody notices.) Being a college or university dean, provost, or president is an interesting and rewarding job: it's been good to me, and with all the tribulations that accompany such posts, I'd still recommend it. Being an honors director is probably more fun, and it does have the added advantage of being closer to students and of generally being viewed by faculty colleagues as not having gone over to the dark side—at least not quite yet. I should add that, not infrequently, a move into a higher administrative echelon brings with it a rather considerable salary boost; sometimes this is even a motivating factor.

- Some people work in honors administration for a year or for a decade or more and then return happily to the classroom, library, and lab where they began. This, too, is a fine career path. Honors administration is still fairly close to the faculty professional culture, and many people are willing to go this far but no further in administration. In this respect, the honors directorship probably resembles the department chairpersonship in that quite often chairs serve their term and then cheerfully rotate back to a professorial role. Often, happily, former honors administrators become current honors teachers.

- And, of course, there are some people (not a whole lot, but more than a couple, I believe) who become honors administrators and stay in that position until they retire or expire. This past year, we lost an old friend, John Grady, who died with his honors boots on. More happily, I think Ada Long went directly from the directorship at UAB to retirement.

So, some people leave honors when they leave academe, some leave to move to higher administrative posts, some leave to move back UP to the professorial life.

PART THREE

When is the right time to end in honors—or, for that matter, in any position in academic administration, or perhaps even in any job?

The quickest and simplest answer, and probably the best one, is: whenever something else sounds better. Oh, sure, we all have fantasies at times. I recall speculating at some point about the possibility of becoming a professional canoe builder and leaving the academic world. But there is a difference, and we all probably can recognize it, between such a fantasy and a genuine and persistent desire to do something else. Maybe the "something else" is something in academe—teaching or deaning. Maybe it is (like Monty Python) something completely different: leading bicycle tours of Tuscany, becoming a lawyer, custom-crafting handmade furniture, launching an entrepreneurial new business in Shanghai, whatever. The older I get, the more forcefully it dawns on me that this lifetime is IT, at least as lifetimes on Earth go, and if we have the luxury and freedom to do so, we should spend as much of it as possible doing what we really want to do.

In rather less grandiose and theological terms, there are some other pretty easy tests of whether or not it is time to end an appointment in academic administration. For example, it is time to move on when it is becoming increasingly difficult to muster genuine and deep feelings for situations which you have seen over and over already. This tends to happen to most of us over time. I knew it was time to consider ceasing to be a chancellor, for example, when I started to find it hard to become too deeply upset over the annual spring racial incident on our campus: as sure as the snow finally melted in Minnesota, some idiot would scrawl a racist phrase on a poster or deface a

sign of a multicultural organization or be heard to say something offensive and stupid. These are terrible things, but after you've been through them a couple dozen times, they lose their ability to shock. How many times can an honors dean lose sleep over a student who waited too long to start his senior thesis and now realizes, ten days before it is due, that he's not going to make it and to whom this crisis seems like the end of the world? If your response to that crisis is becoming a barely suppressed yawn, maybe you need to stop being an honors dean? After all, to that irresponsible student, it really does seem like the end of the world; to those minority students offended by the racist graffiti, this is really a big deal. I'm not suggesting that a persistent, highly elevated level of stress is an indication of job satisfaction. But I am suggesting that, if you don't occasionally get a jolt out of your work, it may be time to find a new job. If most everything that comes up seems to have come up before, maybe it is time to put yourself in a place where something new comes up.

It is also the case that, as we get a year older every year, and our students don't, the distance between us and them gets bigger and bigger. Some of us figure out how to adjust and compensate and overcome that growing gap; others are, finally, defeated by it. I know some academics in their 70s who are still obviously entranced by folks in the 18–21-year-old range; I know others who are not.

Sometimes—not as infrequently as I would wish—we leave jobs as honors administrators because we've been asked to by someone above us in the administrative chain of command. I've known very few people who have spent a career as academic administrators and haven't had at least one job end badly. It's a devastating experience, but it is also one from which complete recovery is the usual prognosis: I speak from personal experience here. I think honors administrators are particularly vulnerable because so often institutions or senior administrators develop (sometimes overnight) some rather startling and unrealistic expectations of what an honors program can and should do—e.g., raise the SAT scores of the entering first-year class dramatically.

Finally, and somewhat idiosyncratically I fear, I think it is time to leave a job when you start to think that all you have to do is hold that job for a few more years, and then you can leave. We have all seen people in our business who are just hanging on, and I can understand and sympathize with those folks, but our business is just too important to be anybody's placekeeper. Our students only get one, very short, baccalaureate honors career, and we are robbing them of an extraordinary and unique experience if during their eight (or ten) semesters, we're waiting for something else to happen.

So, with the range of possibilities outlined before you, know when it is time to end a career in honors administration, and follow one of those other pathways. Don't go prematurely, but don't hang on too long, either.

PART FOUR

It is always tricky to figure out how best to go about leaving an academic administrative job such as honors director or dean.

Assuming you have a choice, how much time should you give the institution to replace you, for example? The actual duration probably varies somewhat from position to position, institution to institution. As a general rule, it is responsible to announce your departure with enough time to comfortably find a replacement but not so far in advance as to create a long, drawn-out lame duckship. A really long administrative twilight is painful for the administrator and dysfunctional for the institution: nobody really knows who's in charge, including the person in charge. I've watched a couple of two-year intervals between the announcement of a departure and the actual departure, and it has never been a pretty thing to see. I think that for most honors leadership positions, it is probably about right to tell the individual to whom you report that you plan to leave at the beginning of your projected last academic year—in, say, August or September if you are planning a May or June stepping down. After consulting with that supervisor, you would probably be wise not to wait too much longer to tell the faculty, staff, and students with whom you work of your plans. I think it is a little abrupt to make such an announcement at the beginning of the semester that will be your last; a bit protracted to communicate your intentions a whole calendar year in advance.

When you tell folks you're going, what do you say?—within reasonable bounds of diplomacy and discretion, the truth. If you are ending in honors to move to something else, say so; say it's been great, but it is time for a new challenge. If you're leaving because someone asked you to, say that there are different visions of the future for honors at your school, and your boss has a different vision than yours. If the truth is painful, it won't get easier; if it is good news, share it. If it is just time, explain that to your colleagues, friends and students: it's a teachable moment—it's good for folks to understand that life has cycles and that they can be embraced with grace.

When an academic administrator steps down, remains at the same institution, and is replaced, what kind of relationship do you cultivate with your replacement? This can be a tricky matter. To some extent, of course, it depends on what that person desires. It is a good idea to meet that new person and make it clear that you are open to cooperating or collaborating in whatever manner, including no manner, she would find most helpful.

Inevitably, in such a situation, you will hear some complaints about the new dean or director. They may be a bit gratifying to hear, to tell the truth. You hope they look bad because you were so good! The nobler course is to urge patience and understanding, to suggest ways to help, not to magnify dissatisfaction about your successor, and never to try to create it.

What do you do if your replacement really does seem to be doing a terrible job? I'm not sure. In some situations, I think maybe the only thing to do is keep your mouth shut and let things work themselves out. In more situations,

though, it is probably best, at some point, to have a chat with that person and lay out honestly and kindly what you are perceiving as the problems. Very very rarely, but sometimes, it might make sense, after speaking to the individual directly, to express your concerns to his or her supervisor, but I'd sure see that as a rather desperate last resort, perhaps only to be tried when you sincerely believe students are being deprived or the program is in mortal jeopardy.

In most other, happier, circumstances, though, offer to help, but then wait until your assistance is sought; don't push yourself, your experience, your expertise on your replacement. Don't hover, don't criticize, don't second-guess: be available and supportive. This is not always easy. If you care for your program, your students, your institution, it is important to do it right.

A brief anecdote might also be relevant here. A retiring college president gave her successor a package containing three numbered envelopes. "If you ever get in any trouble, and you probably will, just open these and follow the instructions," she said. Not too long thereafter, the new chief executive made her first mistake. She opened envelope #1 and read: "Just tell them that you are new on the job, are still learning your way around, and a few early miss-steps are probably inevitable." It worked. Later in the year, she made a second error in judgment, and quickly turned to the second set of instructions. She found this advice: "Say that everyone makes some mistakes, and you acknowledge you've made one in this matter, and you're sorry, and it won't happen again." Once more, the advice worked. But not too much later, a third serious problem arose. The president reached for the third envelope, ripped it open in haste, and read: "Go to the bookstore, and get three envelopes...."

PART FIVE

Many academics have made, and are continuing to make, important contributions to the honors movement after ending their term as honors administrators on their own campuses. Just because one ceases to be an honors director or dean does not mean one ceases to be interested in honors or becomes incapable of doing valuable work therein. I want to end my comments by suggesting just a few of the ways in which an ending in honors doesn't actually have to be the end in honors.

One option is to write for honors. Our publications are always looking for good articles, and our NCHC Publications Board is continually developing new and revised honors monographs. If you have mulled your honors experiences and find you have something to say, write it down: the odds are it will be useful to others.

Not only can a retired honors director write for honors colleagues, but it is possible and desirable to write about honors, for the non-honors audience. One of the perennial complaints we make is that others in academe don't know about us or don't understand what we do and how valuable we are. To revisit a theme of my opening paragraphs, we should spend less time complaining about this marginalization and more time doing something about it, and one of

the best ways is by telling some worthwhile or interesting part of our story to a larger audience.

Of course, such communication doesn't have to be written. Former honors directors often give presentations at regional or national honors meetings, serve on panels, chair sessions, etc. At recent NCHC conferences, for example, past presidents of NCHC have been invited to convene sessions featuring student research presentations.

Former honors administrators should think about the desirability of taking the NCHC training and certification for site evaluators and doing some honors consulting. In some respects, the past honors director is a better, more objective, and potentially more helpful site evaluator than the current director, since that retiree no longer has a program of her own to serve as a template for someone else's. The worst site visitors or consultants are those who go with a preconceived image of what honors programs or colleges should be, and too often that image is a reflection of their own program. The best are those who visit with an open mind and seek to discover the right program for the particular institution they are helping, not to impose on it their own; if you don't have one of your own, this is much easier.

Similarly, honors leaders who have ended their term of administrative service at their home institutions make excellent leaders for programs like "Beginning in Honors" or "Developing in Honors" at the national and regional meetings. This is a great way to support those who are following you, to stay engaged in honors issues, and to put your experience and expertise to productive use.

Other NCHC endeavors can often use that experience and expertise, too: Partners in the Parks, Honors Semesters, Faculty Institutes, and the like. If the honors director who has moved on from daily honors administration has an impulse to stay involved in the honors movement, and most of us do, there is no end of satisfying, genuinely helpful and meritorious ways to do so.

In *Macbeth*, Malcolm says of the executed Cawdor, "Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving of it" (I. iv. 278). Ending an administrative career, or an important phase of an administrative career, in honors or in anything else is certainly not a beheading, but it is a kind of loss. Like that fictional thane, let's leave it well.

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